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Estimates show Elkridge site cheapest option for CSX facility

But officials say cost isn't only factor in choosing site

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A new cost analysis from the CSX Corp. and the Maryland Department of Transportation shows building an intermodal railroad facility on a proposed site in Elkridge would be far cheaper than doing so at any of the three alternative locations being proposed.

While the cost of building the facility on the Elkridge site was estimated between \$140 million and \$165 million, the cost of building at the Beltsville location was estimated between \$175 million and \$200 million; at the Montevideo location between \$200 and \$225 million; and, at the Jessup location between \$300 million and \$325 million.

The analysis takes into consideration a variety of projected expenses, including cost of acquiring land from private owners, the cost of gaining water, electric and utility access, the cost of shifting or relocating existing infrastructure and the cost of mitigating specific environmental concerns, officials said.

The preliminary estimates were posted online Tuesday, Nov. 15, as part of an overall update on the proposed project prepared in advance of a string of public meetings on the project this week. The same update was shared with journalists during a media briefing, also on Tuesday.

Howard Johnson, president of the Greater Elkridge Community Association and an outspoken critic of the proposed Elkridge site, said Tuesday evening that he had not seen the numbers yet, but would be interested to find out more details on how they were determined.

"Do these numbers include anything about impacting the immediate community, and what the cost is to the existing community?" he said.

The Elkridge site has been panned by GECA members and other local residents as being an inappropriate location for an intermodal facility.

Johnson said the facility would likely devalue nearby residential homes, and the projected costs of the project should include the associated dip in county tax revenues.

A fifth option of not building the intermodal facility still exists as well, transportation officials said.

Increased efficiency

The proposed rail facility would increase the efficiency of CSX's operations by allowing the company to double-stack containers on trains, which it can't currently do at the existing Seagirt Marine Terminal in Dundalk, because double-stacked trains can't fit through the Howard Street Tunnel.

The facility would allow the Baltimore region to take better advantage of changing global shipping patterns, including a potential increase in East Coast container traffic from Asian countries, officials said.

The cost analysis of the four proposed locations for the facility only reflects preliminary estimates that are likely to change as the four sites are studied more in depth, said Christopher Smith, director of strategic infrastructure initiatives for CSX.

Cost is also just one of many factors that will be considered in determining a final location for the facility, Smith said.

Others include environmental and community factors that must be considered as part of the National Environmental Policy Act process. Among the environmental considerations are wetlands, flood plains and endangered species, such as the Glassy Darter fish that live on the Jessup site, Smith said.

The NEPA process is a mandatory step for the intermodal project because it will likely be paid for at least in part with federal funds, officials said.

Prior to Tuesday, CSX and MDOT had never given individual estimated price tags for each of the four sites, but had reached a more general agreement to split a cost of up to \$150 million evenly between CSX and the public sector, which would include state and federal funding.

However, the new cost estimates show the commitment of up to \$75 million each from CSX and the public sector likely won't be enough.

Time-consuming process

At the media briefing spokesmen from CSX and MDOT repeatedly emphasized the importance of following the NEPA process thoroughly, despite the desire of residents living near the proposed locations to get answers.

"I think it's all an issue of letting the process run," said Bob Sullivan, a CSX spokesman.

"There is no hard timeline. We need some flexibility," said Jack Cahalan, an MDOT spokesman. Officials said the NEPA process will likely wrap up toward the end of 2012, at which point a final site recommendation will be made to the Federal Highway Administration.

Officials and CSX leaders said they'd like to see the project completed by 2015.

Johnson, the GECA president, said having the project hang over the community for so long has been hard.

"It is tough not to have answers," he said. "It is difficult to still have four sites in the process, but I understand why they do."